

BOOK REVIEWS

The Deer and the Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century. Edited by Donald K. Emmerson. Stanford, California: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia Pacific Research Center, 2020. Softcover: 375pp.

Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia. By David M. Lampton, Selina Ho and Cheng-Chwee Kuik. Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2020. Hardcover: 336pp.

As intellectual curiosity about China's expanding influence in Southeast Asia grows, studies concerning the relationship between the region and its giant northern neighbour are flourishing. This year alone, at least six books have been published on Southeast Asia's relations with China. Two among them are particularly interesting and unique in terms of their intellectual rigour and analytical perspectives: *The Deer and the Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century*, edited by Donald K. Emmerson, and *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia*, by David M. Lampton, Selina Ho and Cheng-Chwee Kuik.

In *The Deer and the Dragon*, Emmerson, one of the most eminent thinkers on Southeast Asia, has rallied an army of top regional experts to examine the nature, dynamics and implications of the power asymmetries between China and the countries of Southeast Asia. In the region's folklore, the motif of the mouse-deer and dragon represents the triumph of brain over brawn. Drawing from that analogy, the book critically investigates the myths and realities of China's preponderance in the region to draw attention to how Southeast Asian countries have been adept at employing strategies such as hedging and balancing to counter China, while also leveraging regional organizations and mechanisms to maximize their strategic autonomy.

The Deer and the Dragon provides a sobering reality check on several key fronts. It examines regional perceptions of China and the United States while identifying their respective leadership deficiencies as Great Powers. It challenges the conventional wisdom that Southeast Asia is China's "strategic backyard", highlighting the differences between Chinese aspirations for the region and Southeast Asia's resistance to China's hegemonic vision. For example, Li Mingjiang discusses Chinese traditional perceptions of Southeast Asia, which forms an illuminating contrast to the region's views of China, as discussed by Yun-han Chu, Min-hua Huang and Jie Lu. See Seng Tan presents a dissection of Singapore's coping strategy with China, which reveals the importance of the strategies and the desire for strategic autonomy in comparison to Indonesia's "underbalancing" of China as explained by Yohanes Sulaiman. Cambodia and Laos have demonstrated the least desire and intention to counterbalance China. Daniel C. O'Neil and Kearnin Sims each offer their explanations for their strategic choices, and raise important questions regarding the consequences for the society and the nation. The chapter on the South China Sea by Emmerson himself is particularly illuminating, as it foregrounds not only the tactics that China uses to exert control over the South China Sea, but also the "institutionalized mirage" (p. 152) of ASEAN that will have to be addressed if there is to be a solution. Minilateralism is perhaps the way to go.

In its discussion of China's bilateral relations with Singapore, Indonesia, Cambodia and Laos, as well as on the Mekong, *The Deer and the Dragon* brings unprecedented new insights about the depths and dimensions of these countries' relationship with China. For example, Singapore's careful pairing of strategic autonomy with the diversification of trade and investment relations; Indonesia's internal juggling among bureaucratic priorities, economic goals and the need for a more active foreign policy; as well as the cycle of Cambodia and Laos' dependence on China for the needs of these two states but which comes with at cost for their people—all vividly present the profound impact different strategies have rendered on individual Southeast Asian countries. The factors that determine their responses to China include their strategic thinking about China, their relative dependence on the Chinese economy and their respective understandings about development. In addition, the United States plays a crucial role in enabling Southeast Asian countries to counter Chinese influence. Countries in the region seek to benefit from China's economic largesse as well as America's

military presence and therefore try to keep their relations with Beijing and Washington in balance.

In *Rivers of Iron*, Lampton and his team take a slightly different approach to unpack the relationship between China and Southeast Asia. Many works have explored the internal dynamics of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its mega-infrastructure projects. But rarely has any scholar dedicated specific attention to the intersection of the political economy of the Chinese bureaucracy driving the infrastructure frenzy and the internal dynamics of the recipient countries.

Rivers of Iron challenges two key assumptions. The first is the impression that Chinese decision-making on BRI projects is coherent and consistent, reflecting the will of the central government, which is then conscientiously implemented by local authorities and state-owned enterprises. However, as the authors point out, not only is Beijing's vision vigorously debated within the Chinese state and society, its decisions can be contested at multiple levels by different actors operating within the bureaucratic apparatus. Local governments, line ministries and commercial interests all have tremendous leeway and leverage to determine the direction and shape of BRI projects. The second is the belief that China imposes its choice of infrastructure projects on recipient countries which passively accept them. To the contrary, the authors show that China's railway collaborations with its Southeast Asian partners are shaped by the interplay of "legitimacy narratives, internal sociopolitical structures and development needs" (p. 85). Rather than being orchestrated by Beijing's high command, BRI involves complex and intricate negotiations within China as well as between Beijing and the Southeast Asian countries.

Using China's railway projects in Southeast Asia as a reference, Lampton and his co-authors seek to understand what enables these development projects to proceed. They attribute it to a shared conviction by China and its Southeast Asian partners about the importance of infrastructure and the function of an interventionist government in taking the lead on infrastructure development. This effectively legitimizes the Chinese approach to infrastructure development in Southeast Asia, challenging the American prioritization of institutions over infrastructure and the role of the private sector over the state. That could be the key reason why, despite China's failure to act reassuringly as a Great Power, Southeast Asian countries still embrace these connectivity

projects that China offers to finance and build, even if they do sometimes hedge.

Both *The Deer and the Dragon* and *Rivers of Iron* address China's approach to Southeast Asia and the corresponding reception by the countries in the region through regional- and issue-level analyses that are interwoven with the case studies. *The Deer and the Dragon* starts with the macro-level strategic situation before deliberating how it manifests in different domains and countries. In comparison, *Rivers of Iron* specifically focuses on the railway and connectivity infrastructure projects in order to draw broader conclusions about the nature and characteristics of Sino-Southeast Asian relations. Although both books explore the geopolitical and strategic implications of that relationship, they reach slightly different conclusions. The authors of *Rivers of Iron* seem inclined to believe that in the geoeconomics game China will prevail, as "All China's Southeast Asian neighbors, including Vietnam, accept the inevitability of meaningful connectivity with the PRC and others. They cannot imagine a successful economic or security future that lies in trying to disconnect from the PRC" (p. 234). But for Emmerson in *The Deer and the Dragon*, "a less exclusively or coercively Sinified scenario is at least as probable (as Chinese hegemony)" (p. xxvii). However, in their broad focus on the region's relationship with China, both books could benefit from a more in-depth look into the differences between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia in their respective interactions with China, as well as the implications of such a divide. *The Deer and the Dragon* discusses the "northern tier" (Chapter 12 by John D. Ciorciari) while *Rivers of Iron* examines the "continentalists" and "advocates for maritime powers" (Chapter 3). Chinese influence over mainland Southeast Asia has historically been more pronounced given their geographical proximity and shared commitments to illiberal political systems. Additionally, it is arguable that Chinese influence over maritime Southeast Asia is less intense, especially considering the subregion's history of cooperation with the United States. Therefore, it might have been worthwhile to explore whether these, among other factors, have affected variations between mainland and maritime Southeast Asian countries in their responses to China, and, more importantly, whether such variations could eventually lead to an internal split and the eventual disintegration of ASEAN.

The two books vividly demonstrate how Southeast Asia traditionally concentrates on its economic relations with China

while anchoring its political and security relations with the United States. Although regional states have developed deep economic ties with China, this has not assuaged their concerns about potential Chinese infringements on their sovereignty and national interests. In that sense, the region's need for a solid commitment from and the robust presence of the United States to counterbalance China's preponderance exists not only in the security domain, but also in the economic arena.

The two books demonstrate well the critical role of the United States as an independent variable shaping the relationship between Southeast Asia and China. The policies and actions of the United States towards Southeast Asia has a deep impact on its future and Great Power dynamics in the region. It remains to be seen whether the United States will prioritize being the dominant leader in the region, or choose instead to be a rule-setter or an offshore balancer, or perhaps even carve a different role for itself. For example, the United States pursues a strategy of preserving freedom of navigation without adopting a position on the various sovereignty quarrels in the South China Sea. Is there a more effective way for the United States to facilitate a solution to these territorial disputes? What is clear is that Southeast Asia does not wish to be neglected by the United States or China, nor does the region want to be forced to choose between them. Hence, the key to the future peace and prosperity of the region lies in determining what the desired equilibrium will look like and what it requires of the two powers.

Last but not least, there is the issue of agency. Both books detail how Southeast Asian countries are not mere victims at the mercy of China. In fact, they have the agency, both internal and external, to develop counterstrategies to dilute, circumvent or neutralize malign Chinese intentions and behaviours. However, because some Southeast Asian countries have less capacity to manoeuvre, this has encouraged a fatalistic view that China's influence over these countries might be inevitable. If this is true, and something that the region collectively would want to avoid, it then becomes a question of what forms of external support or intraregional assistance could help in bolstering the agency and capabilities of these countries to navigate China's offensive. Both the region and external partners such as the United States will have to determine how to advance their interests without necessarily pushing these countries further into China's arms.

Southeast Asia offers fertile ground to study China's hegemonic ambitions. It also functions as a testing ground to determine the most effective counterstrategies that regional countries and external powers can adopt to resist China's wiles. Both books not only significantly advance our understanding about this important topic, but also provide new directions for scholars to explore.

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